Camas Public Library will mark 75th birthday in 1998

By Sharon Michael
Post-Record Staff

The Camas Public Library will be 75 years old in April 1998, and plans for a birthday celebration are getting underway now.

The library has been an important community asset since it first set up shop in the back of the old Rexall pharmacy in 1923, and citizens of the community and library patrons are encouraged to join in planning the anniversary observance.

The library's board of trustees, Friends of the Camas Library, and the newly established Camas Library Foundation, invite anyone who is interested in being involved in celebrating the library to join them in the library's upstairs meeting room tomorrow at 7 p.m.

David Zavortink, Camas library director, extends a special invitation to people who lived here in 1923 when the library first opened.

Irene Roffler was "in charge of books" at the original Camas Pharmacy location and the Civic Club furnished the library, said Zavortink. Just one month after it opened, he added, the library had issued 70 library cards.

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>
> — David Zavortink

Barb Baldus, library board member, urges long-time residents to search their basements and attics for pictures of Camas and the library during the early days.

Among the sought after items are pictures of Irene Roffler and the 1923 Camas High School graduating class.

Sometimes people don't understand how important and special it is to share old photographs with the community, Baldus added.

But more important, say Baldus and Zavortink, is for people who love the library to come and share their ideas and get in on the fun of planning the anniversary celebration.

"People should bring their ideas that they've seen be successful in the past," said Baldus. "And bring new ideas, too.

"We'll be celebrating the beautiful building as much as anything else," Baldus added.

In August 1923, the library moved into the new city hall where it continued to operate until 1940 when the library building on Northeast Franklin Street was completed.

But now approaching 60, the current library building is experiencing serious growing pains.

"One-hundred-forty-thousand people came in the doors last year," said Zavortink. "That's up 20,000 from a couple of years ago.

"Circulation has gone up 100 percent in the last 10 years," he added. In 1996, the library checked out 173,924 books, audio tapes and video tapes. In addition, library users borrowed 19,070 items from other libraries and the Camas library loaned 30,072 items to patrons at Fort Vancouver Regional Library (FVRL) libraries.

There are more and more people using the library's reference services, Zavortink said. Library staff fielded 20,650 reference questions last year.

More than 500 kids participated in last year's summer reading program.

When the library opened it 1923, it was open four hours a week and Roffler was the only staff member. Today, nine staff members serve library patrons 60 hours a week.

Zavortink said about 60 percent of the people in Camas have library cards.

Many daily visitors to the library come in to check up on their investments and to read newspapers, Zavortink said.

"We have a real good relationship with the schools," he added. But when a whole class of eighth graders comes into the library at once, "Where do you put 50 kids?"

There's not only a shortage of places to sit, but a shortage of shelf space for new books, said Zavortink. He said the number of books kept on the shelves has changed very little over the years.

"We can't add shelving because the flooring won't take it," he added. "We have lots of things in storage, and workspace is tight.

"We've realized that we need to do something for about 10 years," Zavortink said. "It's getting more urgent every day."

Zavortink said that the many little nooks and crannies and the lack of sufficient electrical outlets in parts of the building limit the effective use of the existing space.

In 1990-91, the library planned to remodel and expand, but money for the project was tied to the plan to renovate and enlarge city hall, and the bond levy failed.

Since then, Zavortink says, the library renovation has been listed in the capital facility plan, but it hasn't made it to the top of the list yet.

"It's still on the list, but down about a third on the list," he explained.

One of the goals of the anniversary celebration is to publicize the newly incorporated tax exempt Camas Library Foundation, formed to raise funds for the library.

"The city budget will provide the potatoes," said Zavortink. "They will provide the butter for the parsleyed potatoes."

The Camas Public Library has always been an independent library funded out of the city's general fund. It is the only library within the boundaries of the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District that is not part of the district, but it does have reciprocal borrowing arrangements with FVRL that gives Camas library patrons access to 200,000 items in addition to 50,000 items available locally.

"The consortium also shares the computer system," Zavortink explained.

Technology is one of the things the library would improve with foundation funds.

"Technology is pricey," explained Zavortink. "What we have won't last forever."

The foundation plans a campaign urging people to donate "$75 for 75 years."

There hasn't been a good vehicle for receiving bequests and other cash donations to the library, said Zavortink. Those donations go into the city's general fund and have to be reallocated to the library.

"A foundation is one way to avoid those hassles," Zavortink added.

But the upcoming anniversary celebration is not just about raising money. "It's to have fun and publicize the library," said Zavortink.

One of the goals of library officials is to make the celebration of the community library a true community event that gets people involved and offers a little something for everyone. Zavortink would like to see a year-long celebration that includes events like old time ice cream socials.

"People love the library," he said."There's a lot of support for the library."

Zavortink said the idea of the meeting Wednesday is to get people interested in helping plan the celebration. Everything is open for discussion, including the length of the celebration.

The Camas Public Library was located in the Johnson Building (above) from August 1923 until 1940 when it moved into the current building. The children's reading room (left) has more shelves and less space to sit now than it did when the new building first opened. It is a very busy place after school and on Saturdays. The circulation desk (below, right) is shown as it was when the new building first opened. It has since been relocated. The new library building (below, left) looked much different without the trees and shrubs, book return bins and parking control signs that are there today. *Photos courtesy of the Camas Public Library.*